Strategic Insight

Removal of Saddam: The End of an Era

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Setting the Scene

This paper presents some brief thoughts on the "landscape" in the Persian Gulf today and the potential impact of a war with Iraq on this landscape, and then identifies a variety of strategic and policy challenges that I see emerging in a post-Saddam era.

In 1989 the Berlin wall came down, auguring a new era known euphemistically as the "post cold war" world. The world saw a variety of political and economic reforms around the globe as part of this new environment. Various artificial entities split apart and others came together, creating unity in some places and horrific conflicts in others. The world became both a safer and a more dangerous place.

The removal of Saddam will represent the end of an era in the Gulf and, in my opinion, will go down as the equivalent of the crumbling of the Berlin wall in the region. As was the case in 1989, forces that have been pent up for the last 20 years—"the era of Saddam"— will unleash themselves in ways that will be difficult to predict. These "unintended consequences" will pose a broad strategic challenge to the existing order in the region, the United States and the wider international community.

Era of the 1990s

During the 1990s at the close of Gulf War I, the region remained superficially frozen in place as a result of the United States' policy of dual containment, which required large numbers of continuously deployed military personnel performing: maritime interception operations out of the Central Command's naval component in Bahrain; Operation Northern Watch out of Incirlik in Turkey; Operation Southern Watch out of host-nation facilities in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates; Operation Desert Spring in which ground troops exercised with prepositioned military equipment in Kuwait; and a continuously deployed aircraft carrier.

Accompanying this military framework was a series of tacit political understandings with all the "friendlies," or coalition partners (as they came to be called), on the Arabian Peninsula in which they signed up to the requirements of supporting our military operations, providing access, assistance-in-kind and other forms of support. In exchange, these countries were fully "integrated" into the United States' security umbrella in the Gulf, and, in a parallel commitment, the United States for the most part declined to press them to institute political and economic reforms that all could see were necessary. As long as the elites supported the United States military presence and the containment mission and did not overtly impede efforts to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict, the arrangement worked out reasonably well. The conventional military threat from Iraq was largely mitigated during the 1990s, though the United States increasingly found

itself using force in what became a *de facto* conventional counterforce mission to control and/or disarm Saddam and his weapons of mass destruction programs. While these counterforce strikes became an irritant to the regimes, the short duration of the operations ensured that they did not provoke more long-lasting and fundamental challenges in their security partnerships with the United States. Oil prices recovered in the mid- to late 1990s, and the Gulf monarchies enjoyed a period of relative domestic prosperity and stability.

The political landscape seemed relatively stable during the decade until the Al Aqsa Intifada got underway in earnest in September 2000. The intensity of the reaction to the Palestinian uprising was in hindsight fed by an already dry tinderbox of anti-U.S. sentiment throughout the Middle East, suggesting that a variety of pent up forces were manifesting themselves. But initially, at least, as long as the United States actively encouraged the parties to return to the negotiating table, the regimes could still address the growing domestic discontent and continue to fill their part of the bargain and continue their tacit support for containment of Saddam.

The New Millennium

Tremors in the landscape suggesting that the system in place during the 1990s was creaking under the strain greeted the incoming Bush Administration. The intifada had spiraled out of control by this point, with the Palestinian Authority effectively reduced to bystander status in the horrific cycle of violence in the occupied territories. Then came the Bush administration's perceived abandonment of the peace process, which for many in the region removed whatever tattered last vestiges remained of the aura of the United States as the "honest broker" in the peace process. This growing public perception thus also removed whatever remained of the political cover for the region's elites to continue their support for the U.S. policy of containing Saddam. On top of this came the attacks of 9/11 and the resulting global war on terrorism, with attention focused very specifically on the Gulf as a source of funding and recruits for Al Qaeda. In the post-9/11 environment, the 4 tons of VX nerve agent being hidden from weapons inspectors in Iraq suddenly assumed a different light for decision-makers in the Bush administration.

The impending removal of Saddam becomes another signpost in this sequence of events, which provides a certain momentum all its own in a crumbling of that "Berlin Wall" that ensured regional stability during the 1990s. The region is now entering uncharted waters. Though not a stated "war" objective in the campaign to remove Saddam, the prospect of a new form of government in Iraq appears to have prompted the region's elites to start addressing the issues of political and economic transition that must occur if states in the region are to join the "modern" community of nation states in the new century. In Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Abdullah is taking a leadership position by openly discussing the necessity of political and economic reform not just in Saudi Arabia but also throughout the entire region. But in keeping with the concept of unintended consequences in the post Cold War world, it is also unclear whether and to what degree the process of political and economic transition can be controlled once it is begun without a descent into regional anarchy and violence.

The landscape in the region is thus already dramatically altered with the United States apparently in the final countdown to a Gulf War II.

Post-Saddam Challenges for the United States

The United States has the opportunity to fundamentally redraw the security architecture in the region after Saddam is gone and examine a number of assumptions that have driven U.S. strategy and policy in the Gulf for the last 25 years. It is an exciting prospect for anyone who is involved in Gulf strategy and policy.

First, the United States can consider whether the new environment created in a post-Saddam era will require large numbers of continuously deployed military personnel. While post-conflict/nation building operations in Iraq will require an extended presence, the requirements for large numbers of military personnel in the other Gulf states is unclear. The Saudis, for example, have indicated an interest in discussing the withdrawal of operational components deployed at Prince Sultan Air Base. Other Gulf elites would probably welcome a draw down of U.S. operational components that have become a domestic political liability.

Second, decision-makers need to look more broadly at another assumption—that an Iraq-Iran "balance" is a requirement for long-term security and stability in the Gulf. It is frankly unclear why this should be a requirement for U.S. strategy and policy. On the military side, there has been a dramatic decline in the conventional military capabilities of both countries over the last decade. Politically, it is difficult to see how Iraq will threaten the region for the foreseeable future. And, in a reversal of the situation that existed in the 1980s, the Gulf monarchies are if anything more stable than Iran, which appears headed for political upheaval. Neither country appears to represent a significant military threat to the region.

Third, the United States will need determine what if any role it can play in the coming period of economic and political transition in the Gulf.

Post-Saddam Challenges for the Region

The removal of Saddam will usher in a process of political and economic transition that may take several decades to unfold. On the political front, the Gulf States must move towards different forms of government that involve some degree of political participation by their citizens. The Saudis appear interested in moving in this direction, and the rest of the Gulf States have also made halting moves in this direction, as suggested by last year's elections in Bahrain. In Saudi Arabia, the idea of political transition in a state administered under Islamic law—the Sharia—is a daunting prospect. Whether and how such an evolution can work remain unclear.

Economically, the distributive rentier systems used in the Gulf States need to be changed fundamentally to meet the needs of the region's burgeoning population. The Saudis, for example, cannot pump enough oil to grow their per capita gross domestic product sufficiently to keep pace with their population growth rate. Crown Prince Abdullah has once again signaled an interest in taking on this issue as well. He will need whatever support the international community can offer on what ultimately will have to be a wrenching series of reforms to the centrally planned Saudi economy. As goes Saudi Arabia, so go the smaller Gulf monarchies.

The ultimate goal of political and economic reform in the Gulf is a workable form of "modern" government that arrives at a balance between human rights, religion and politics. Such a system must be in place for the region to make the domestic investment and to attract the foreign investment necessary to double oil exports over the next 20 years to keep pace with global demand.

The Gulf States will also face security challenges in the in the post-Saddam era. It is time for the region to finally get serious about collective security and regional military integration. The Gulf Cooperation Council needs to be reinvigorated or replaced with some other vehicle to move the states towards a real system of collective security. Relatedly, the region will need to determine how to structure their security relationships with the United States. It is of paramount importance that the United States and the Gulf States come to some sort of happy medium on the nature of the post Gulf War II security relationships.

Conclusion

The international community faces stakes of global importance in the new era that is dawning in the Gulf. An immutable fact is that the world will become more dependent on imported oil from the Gulf over the next 20 years. With global demand expected to increase from 75 million bpd to 119 million bpd by 2020, the Gulf will have to double oil exports during the period to meet this demand. Failure to meet this objective will have dramatic consequences for the global economy. The central challenge facing the United States is to determine how the use of force in Gulf War II and the removal of Saddam can help the Gulf achieve this overriding strategic objective after the "wall" comes tumbling down.

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